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Citation style: Borysławski Rafał. (2008). Alfred Jewel and the Old English "Solomon and Saturn" dialogues : wisdom and chaos in the Old English gnomes. W: P. Dziedzic, M. Nitka (red.), "Fire and ice : the dialectic of order and chaos" (S. 24-38). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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Alfred Jewel and the Old English "Solomon and Saturn" Dialogues: Wisdom and Chaos in Old English Gnomic

[...] Sum bið listhendig
to awritanene wordgereno.
"The Gifts of Men," 10th/11th c.

[...] One is skilful
to write the mysteries of words.

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is in possession of a rare Anglo-Saxon artefact found in Somerset, in the late 17th century. The object is now known as the Alfred Jewel and it shall serve here both as a visual motto and a focal concept to this essay. Tradition and archaeology link it with the king of Wessex, who captured the imagination of the English to such an extent as to have been granted the byname of the "Great," and who, for centuries, served both as a benchmark for English monarchs and later as an icon of English imperialist propaganda.¹ The object itself seems to belong to the world of Anglo-Saxon history and Anglo-Saxon myth at the same time; it was found in the area where in 878 King Alfred, disguised as a commoner, supposedly found

¹ Cf., for instance NORMAN DAVIES, *The Isles. A History* (Oxford: Papermac, 2000, pp. 248—251; VELMA BOURGEOIS RICHMOND, "Historical Novels to Teach Anglo-Saxonism," in: *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, eds. ALLEN J. FRANTZEN and JOHN D. NILES (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 183—187; RAFAŁ BORYSLAWSKI, "Imperial Anglo-Saxonism: On the Organic Roots of the English Sense of Superiority in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in: *Organism, Organisations. Organic Form in 19th-Century Discourse*, eds. TADEUSZ RACHWAŁ and TADEUSZ SŁAWEK (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 86—88.

refuge from the Great Army of the Vikings, but it was also there, as the 10th century *Vita Sancti Neoti* makes known, that the incognito king, greatly overcome with worries about his kingdom, forgot about and burned the bread he was supposed to mind for an old widow, who had provided him with shelter.² The Alfred Jewel is an enamelled figural plaque set beneath a polished rock-crystal and surrounded with gold-work, terminating in a grotesque animal-head socket, once probably holding a rod or a pin. The gold-work bears the famous inscription *Ælfred mec heht gewyrcean*, "Alfred ordered me to be made."

Soon after its discovery, it was suggested that the jewel had in fact been mentioned by King Alfred in the preface to his translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* as an *æstel*, that is, a book pointer Alfred intended to be sent with a copy of his translation to every bishopric in his kingdom:

Da ic ða gemunde hu sio lar Lædengediodes ær ðissum afeallen wæs giond Angelcynn, ond ðeah monige cuðon Englisc gewrit arædan, ða ongan ic ongemang oðrum mislicum ond manigfealdum bisgum ðisses kynerices ða boc wendan on Englisc ðe is genemned on Læden *Pastoralis*, ond on Englisc Hierdeboc, hwilum word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgiete, swæ swæ ic hie geliornode æt Plegmunde minum ærcebiscepe, ond æt Assere minum biscepe, ond æt Grimbolde minum mæssepreoste, ond æt Iohanne minum mæssepreoste. Siððan ic hie ða geliornod hæfde, swæ swæ ic hie forstod ond swæ ic hie andgitfullicost areccean meahte, ic hie on Englisc awende; ond to ælcum biscepstole on minum rice wille ane onsendan; ond on ælcra bið an æstel, se bið on fiftægum mancessa. Ond ic bebiode on Godes naman ðæt nan mon ðone æstel from ðære bec ne do, ne ða boc from ðæm mynstre — uncuð hu longe ðær swæ gelærede biscepas sien, swæ swæ nu, Gode ðonc, welhwær siendon. Forðy ic wolde ðætte hie ealneg æt ðære stowe wæren, buton se biscep hie mid him habban wille, oððe hio hwær to læne sie, oððe hwa oðre bi write.³

When I recalled how knowledge of Latin had previously decayed throughout England, and yet many could still read things written in English, I then began, amidst the various and multifarious afflictions of this kingdom, to translate into English the book which in Latin is called *Pastoralis*, in English 'Shepherd-book' [*Hierdeboc*], sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense [*hwilum word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgiete*], as I learnt it from Plegmund, my archbishop, and from Asser my bishop, and from Grimbald my mass-priest and from John my mass-priest. After I had mastered it, I translated it into English as best I understood it and as I could most meaningfully render it; I intend to send a copy to each bishopric in my

² Cf. *Alfred the Great. Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, eds. and trans. SIMON KEYNES and MICHAEL LAPIDGE (London: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 197–202.

³ *King Alfred's West Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. HENRY SWEET, *Early English Text Society* No. 48, Hatton MS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1871), p. 7.

kingdom; and in each copy there will be an *æstel* worth fifty mancuses.⁴ And in God's name I command that no one shall take that *æstel* from the book, nor the book from the church. It is not known how long there shall be such learned bishops as, thanks be to God, there are now nearly everywhere. Therefore I would wish that they [the book and the *æstel*] always remain in place [*ðætte hie ealneg æt ðære stowe wæren*], unless the bishop wishes to have the book with him, or it is on loan somewhere, or someone is copying it.⁵

The artefact held now in Oxford could be the actual ornamented head of such a pointer. If it is true, that is, if Alfred Jewel is in fact the head of the *æstel* King Alfred mentions in his preface to *Cura Pastoralis*, then it appears to have been an instrument of guidance on at least several levels. Firstly, it provided guidance through the apparent chaos of the text, since it was used for following the lines as they were being read and, possibly also, as a bookmark. Secondly, it was an instrument of royal control, both if we bear in mind the inscription appearing on it, reading that it had been made on the king's order, and if we remember the words of the king from the preface: *Forðy ic wolde ðæatte hie ealneg æt ðære stowe wæren*, "I would wish that they [the book and the *æstel*] always remain in place." By the king's order, then, the book and the book pointer were to be inseparable. Anyone holding the *æstel* in his hand would have to do it by holding its ornamented head, and, thus, symbolically, anyone holding the *æstel* to follow Alfred's rendering of the *Pastoral Care*, would be both following the words of the king and holding the king's words in his hand. As such, the *æstel* would become a political and moral statement in itself; a lesson in humility held in one's hand. Thirdly, the guidance offered by the Alfred Jewel as an inseparable companion to Alfred's *Pastoral Care* was also the guidance in the art of governance and statecraft: as much as the *æstel* was to be a guide through the text, the *Pastoral Care* itself was a book providing its readers with advice and guidance. It treated about nothing else, but about the spiritual and intellectual qualities essential for the men who had been entrusted with the government of others.

For the purpose of the present study, what is interesting about the Alfred Jewel lies in the combination of the presence and absence implicated by it. For one thing, it is the presence of a mysterious enamelled figure with unnaturally large eyes, holding in each hand sceptre-like objects ending in some floral designs. No conclusive interpretation of the image has been provided and the suggestions range from Christ in majesty, through King Alfred himself to the

⁴ A *mancus* (a rare Arabic borrowing into Old English) was a gold coin equal to thirty silver pence. Fifty mancuses was equal to the value of fifty oxen or three hundred sheep.

⁵ *Alfred* ..., p. 126.

personified sense of sight or a personification of Wisdom.⁶ For the other, it is the very absence of the wooden or ivory pin or rod that must have filled its socket, that is the very pointer used while reading, without which the object has lost its utilitarian value. The meaning of the Jewel is thus suspended between the absence connected with its function as a book pointer, that is the absence which is neither mysterious nor concealed from us, and the presence of the figure, whose intended significance we will never learn. This absence and presence within the Alfred Jewel combine into a sense which I propose to extend into a discussion of the dialectics and interdependency between communication and confusion, and thus between order and chaos, that, I believe, constitutes the fundament of the philosophy of wisdom present in the Old English gnomic texts. The sense of duality is visually strengthened by the two identical sceptres held by the figure shown behind the rock crystal of the Jewel, serving as the signs of some dual power or two symmetrical aspects of an idea represented by the figure.

The Old English gnomic literature was once aptly characterized by T.A. Shippey, one of the first Anglo-Saxonists to have distinguished this group of texts, as treating of matters *deop*, *deorc*, *dygel*, *dyrne* "deep, dark, secret and hidden."⁷ The origins of texts belonging to this group have particularly recently been linked with the time of King Alfred himself.⁸ Asser (d.c. 909), his contemporary, friend, aide and eulogist makes frequent mentions of the king's keen interest in the promotion of learning and provides numerous examples of the king's almost Solomonic wisdom in his *Vita Alfredi*, written around 893, that is some six years before the death of King Alfred. In Asser's comments resound the early notes of the later myth of King Alfred as an English Solomon:

[...] he [unjustly] used to moan and sigh continually because Almighty God had created him lacking in divine learning and knowledge of the liberal arts. In this respect he resembled the holy, highly esteemed and exceedingly wealthy Solomon, king of the Hebrews, who, once upon a time, having come to despise all renown and wealth of this world, sought wisdom from God [...] But God [...] stimulated King Alfred's intelligence from within [...] so that he could acquire helpers in this good intention of his, who would be able to help him attain to the desired wisdom and enable him to fulfil his wishes whenever

⁶ Cf. "Alfred Jewel," in: *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, eds. MICHAEL LAPIDGE, JOHN BLAIR, SIMON KEYNES and DONALD SCRAGG (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 28–29.

⁷ T.A. SHIPPEY, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge: D.S. BREWER, 1976), p. 4.

⁸ PATRICK P. O'NEIL, "On the Date, Provenance and Relationship of the 'Solomon and Saturn' Dialogues," in: *Anglo-Saxon England* 26, eds. MICHAEL LAPIDGE, MALCOLM GODDEN and SIMON KEYNES (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 139–165.

possible. Accordingly, just like the clever bee which at first light in summer time departs from its beloved honeycomb, finds its way with swift flight on its unpredictable journey through the air, lights upon the many and various flowers of grasses, plants and shrubs, discovers what pleases it most and then carries it back home, King Alfred directed the eyes of his mind far afield and sought without what he did not possess within, that is to say, within his own kingdom.⁹

Curiously, it is not just King Solomon that Asser compares King Alfred to. The king's biographer employs the bee parable used almost two centuries earlier by Aldhelm, Asser's predecessor as bishop of Sherborne, in his *De Virginitate*, a prose eulogy to virginity, written as a moral instruction for nuns.¹⁰ Even if *De Virginitate* cannot be treated as a gnomic text *per se*, it shares the aura of moral instruction with later such writings. Moreover, Aldhelm is the author who must be seen as immensely important for the rise of Anglo-Saxon gnomic tradition; it was him who introduced the genre of poetic enigma as a means of exploring the boundaries of divine wisdom and later Anglo-Saxon gnomic writings would frequently resemble the form of enigmatic messages.¹¹ Asser's borrowing from Aldhelm might also bring to mind a parallel with, possibly, the most frequently quoted passage from Anglo-Latin prose, namely with the allegory from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Book II, Chapter 13) comparing human life to an insecure existence of a sparrow. However different the two passages are, and however divided they are in time, they both resort to the metaphor of an insecure journey, effectively making use of the antithesis of wisdom, that is, of chaos.

If we examine the Old English wisdom literature in search for self-referential remarks, we will find probably a most applicable and yet a very pithy comment in the text known as the Old English "Maxims II" or as the "Cotton Gnomes." Among the apparent chaos of the initial perceptive statements in the poem, its anonymous author includes a remark, saying that *soð bið switolost, sinc byð deorost*,¹² "truth is most deceptive, treasure is dearest."¹³ This curt observation ushers in the aura of mystery and confusion combined, however, with what is characteristic for other wisdom texts, that is, with the utilitarian value of wisdom. In "Maxims II" the stress on the deceptiveness of truth is thus immediately followed by a figurative reference to treasure. The sense of

⁹ ASSER, *Life of King Alfred*, in: *Alfred the Great*, eds. and trans. S. KEYNES and M. LA-PIDGE, p. 92.

¹⁰ ASSER, *Life ...*, pp. 258–259.

¹¹ Cf. RAFAL BORYSLAWSKI, *The Old English Riddles and the Riddlic Elements of Old English Poetry* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 53–71.

¹² "Maxims II," in: *Anglo-Saxon Didactic Verse*, ed. and trans. LOUIS J. RODRIGUES (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1995), p. 190, l. 10.

¹³ "Maxims II," p. 191, l. 10.

confusion and mystery is characteristic of Old English wisdom literature in general, and confusion and mystery function there as its hidden, but important fundaments. Some fifteen to twenty poems scattered over several Anglo-Saxon manuscripts fall into the category of gnomic texts, and are best, if tentatively, described by Elaine Tuttle Hansen as "literature written in a non-realistic, non-narrative mode that hopes for and encodes the active involvement of its audience in both the self-conscious construction of meaning in the text and the application of that meaning outside of the text."¹⁴

What Hansen calls "the self-conscious construction of meaning in the text" is at the same time its appeal, where the communication of wisdom is fraught with the sense of deliberate confusion and where the messages that are apparently straightforward on their own, appear arranged in an order that borders on chaos. If the texts' authors premeditated any logic in the arrangement of the gnomic remarks, its subtle links continue escaping our grasp. The dichotomy between confusion and communication present in those texts results from a dualistic outlook on reality that we find there, the dualism of which I symbolically see as present in the form of the two sceptres held by the figure of the Alfred Jewel. Whoever is represented in the Jewel, he is turning his large eyes to the sceptre on his right, as if favouring the side of order and wisdom, but simultaneously not forgetting about the opposing element of chaos, without which the former would lose its distinction. It is tempting to see such a reading of the Jewel in view of Asser's rather sycophantic comment on King Alfred's ability to pursue a range of disparate activities:

Meanwhile the king, amid the wars and the numerous interruptions of this present life — not to mention the Viking attacks and his continual bodily infirmities — did not refrain from directing the government of the kingdom; pursuing all manner of hunting; giving instructions to [...] craftsmen; [...] reading aloud from books in English and above all learning English by heart; issuing orders to his followers: all these things he did himself with great application to the best of his abilities.¹⁵

Comparably, the Old English gnomic texts teach of the importance of accepting the inevitability of conflicts between what is orderly and what is disorderly. "Maxims II," in their preceptive manner, emphasize the necessity to contemplate and accept such painful dichotomies:

God sceal wið yfele, geogoð sceal wið ylðo,
lif sceal wið deaþe, leoht sceal wið bystrum,

¹⁴ ELAINE TUTTLE HANSEN, *The Solomon Complex. Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 10—11.

¹⁵ ASSER, *Life* ..., p. 91.

fyrð wið fyrðe, feond wið oðrum,
lað wið lape ymb land sacan,
synne stælan. A sceal snotor hycgan
ymb þysse worulde gewinn, [...]'¹⁶

Good must strive with evil, youth with age,
life with death, light with darkness,
army with army, foes with one another,
round about the land meet force with force,
avenge hostility. Ever must the wise man think
of conflicts in the world. [...]'¹⁷

This sense of polarity encourages at least two courses of interpretation applicable to the gnomic texts. Firstly, it is the belief in the true appreciation of wisdom as emerging from the contrast between what is revealed and what is concealed. It is an ancient tradition, bordering on sublime religious or mythical experience. Umberto Eco, in his essay on interpretation and history, comments on this primeval understanding of knowledge, saying that "secret knowledge is deep knowledge (because only what is lying under the surface can remain unknown for long). Thus truth becomes identified with what is not said or what is said obscurely and must be understood beyond or beneath the surface of a text. The gods speak (today we would say: the Being is speaking) through hieroglyphic and enigmatic messages."¹⁸ Secondly, however, Old English wisdom poems are instances of experiencing the humanizing limitation of man's capacities of comprehension and insight. These two strategies — fusing the mysterious with the humanizing aspects — are not mutually opposed or exclusive. They rather combine into an explanation of Old English wisdom literature, which T.A. Shippey called "neither knowledge nor faith nor morality, but an uneasy mixture of all these and more, a way of life rather than a possession, a balance only to be acquired [...] by age and experience, and not by the activity of reading poems at all."¹⁹

Shippey's remark appears to present a vision of Old English gnomic texts similar to the understanding of wisdom presented in King Alfred's proem to his translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. The translation, or, rather, the text based on *De consolazione philosophiae*, attributed to Alfred himself, opens with what may be the King's exemplary observation on the sense of wisdom and understanding as acts issuing from individual contemplation:

¹⁶ "Maxims II," p. 192, ll. 50—55.

¹⁷ "Maxims II," p. 193, ll. 50—55.

¹⁸ UMBERTO ECO, "Interpretation and History," in: *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 30.

¹⁹ T.A. SHIPPEY, *Poems ...*, p. 4.

Onð nu bit onð for Godes naman he halsað ælcne þara þe þas boc rædan lyste, þæt he for hine gebidde, onð him ne wite gif he hit rihtlicor ongite [comprehend] þonne he mihte: for þam þe ælc mon sceal be his andgites mæðe, onð be his æmettan sprecan þæt he sprecð, onð don þæt þæt he deþ.²⁰

And now he prays and entreats in God's name each one of those who might desire to read this book, that he will pray for him, and will not blame him if they are able to interpret it more accurately than he could: for each person must, by the measures of his own understanding and at his leisure, say what he says and do what he does.²¹

Alfred's remark that each person must "say what he says and do what he does" itself possesses the resonance of Old English gnomic instructions. It resembles not only the sound of the apophthegms present in, for instance, the Exeter Gnomic (also known as "Maxims I"), or in the Cotton Gnomic ("Maxims II"), but it even calls to mind the gnomic fragments of "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer," expounding the necessity of the sense of individual wisdom gained from experience.

However, Alfredian translation of Boethius can also be an illustration of the two pillars upon which Old English gnomic poetry had been founded. On the one hand, it is the Judeo-Christian tradition, combined with the philosophical background of the classics. On the other, however, the form of dialogue employed by Boethius in his work, and rendered into Old English by Alfred, establishes a connection with a much earlier intellectual tradition of dialogues functioning as sacred texts, or as wisdom contests. Alfred, or his ghost-writer, altered the identity of the original discussers; instead of Boethius' conversation with Lady Philosophy, Alfred introduces a dialogue between *Mod*, "Mind," and *Gesceadwisnes*, "Wisdom," and, although his interpretation of Boethius is overtly Christian, it frequently employs less of the original's logic and philosophy and more of the arguments based on authority and allegory.²² This form is clearly reminiscent of gnomic dialogues, present in pre-Christian Germanic literature, and which, in Judeo-Christian world, go back to the biblical story of King Solomon, answering the questions of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1–6), and other accounts of Solomon's wisdom. Question and answer dialogues usually take place between an immature, untrained person and a tutor who, as in the Old Norse *Herevarar saga* about King Heidrek's contest with disguised Odin, may be even of divine provenance.

²⁰ *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius' "De consolazione philosophiae, King Alfred's Poem,"* ed. WALTER JOHN SEDGEFIELD (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899; reprinted Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), p. 2.

²¹ *Old and Middle English. An Anthology*, ed. ELAINE TREHARNE (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 15–17.

²² Cf. "Alfredian Texts," in: *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 30.

The Old English literary tradition possesses instances of such dialogues, the debates known as "Solomon and Saturn," of which there are four: two poetic and two prose dialogues. The poetic dialogues are the oldest of the four, preserved in Cambridge Corpus Christi College manuscript. Although no exact evidence about their origins exists, Patrick O'Neill recently suggested that the Old English Solomon dialogues might date back to the times of King Alfred, as they bear notable similarities to Alfred's translation of Boethius.²³ Both poetic dialogues present Saturn, a Chaldean prince who had searched the lore of Libya, Greece and India, questioning King Solomon about a range of apparently unrelated and chaotically arranged topics. The first dialogue revolves around the mystery of *gepalmtiwigede Pater Noster*, the "Palm-twigg'd Pater Noster" (l. 39), as the fundamental source of the strength Christianity derives from wisdom. Solomon's answer guides Saturn through the mystery of the canticle by providing a series of apophthegms, but ultimately the significance of Solomon's answer seems to be lying in the semiotic deconstruction of the individual letters spelling the opening lines of *Pater Noster*. In "Solomon and Saturn I" they appear as runes, in the manner similar to the way Cynewulf, possibly also a contemporary of King Alfred, used to sign his poems, intertwining the runes spelling his name within the lines of his texts. As in Cynewulfian texts, the meaning of the runic letters in "Solomon and Saturn I" may thus be construed on three planes. Not only do they spell "Pater Noster" with their phonetic value, but their nature is performative, being akin in this to verbal magic, and they carry the additional meaning denoted by the runic symbols. For instance, when S of *coelis*, "heaven" appears, the runic ᛚ, "S" stands not only for the "sun" but also, in its symbolic value, for Christ himself:

ðonne ᛚ cymeð, engla geræswa,
 wuldores stæf, wraðne gegripeð
 feond be ðam fotum, læteð foreweard hleor
 on strangne stan, stregdað toðas
 geond helle heap. [...] ²⁴

Then S [sun] shall come, the Prince of angels,
 the staff of glory, grip the angry
 fiend by the feet, let his cheek fall forward
 on a strong stone and scatter his teeth
 among hell's heap. [...] ²⁵

²³ P.P. O'NEILL, "On the Date, Provenance and Relationship of the 'Solomon and Saturn' Dialogues," pp. 154ff.

²⁴ "Solomon and Saturn I," in: *Anglo-Saxon Didactic Verse*, p. 158, ll. 111—115.

²⁵ "Solomon and Saturn I," p. 159, ll. 111—115.

This aspect of "Solomon and Saturn I," apart from resembling the runic signatures of Cynewulf mentioned above, is even more reminiscent of another gnomic text, "The Rune Poem," which presents in an apothegmatic way the meaning of each of the runic signs. "The Rune Poem," "Solomon and Saturn," Cynewulfian signatures and other instances of Old English poetry combining runic signs with Latin letters are evocative of the Isidore of Seville's remark on the nature of letters from his *Etymologiae*: *Litterae autem sunt indices rerum, signa verborum, quibus tanta vis est, ut nobis dicta absentium sine voce loquantur*,²⁶ "Letters are the disclosers of things, the signs of words, in which there is such power that the speech of those absent is spoken to us without voice." And it is with the help of the letters of the holy *Pater Noster* that King Solomon overcomes Saturn. In "Solomon and Saturn I" King Solomon employs confusion and bafflement as the weapons with which his enemy is controlled: the first dialogue literally speaks of striking Saturn with confusion arising from the command over the Logos that the opponent is deprived of:

Mæg simle se godes cwide gumena gehwylcum
calra feonda gehwane fleondne gebrengan.²⁷

Ever may the word of God for every man
put every fiend to flight.²⁸

"Solomon and Saturn II" is even more of a colloquy than its precedent. The dialogue is initiated here by Saturn and there appears no sense of a unifying theme, as was in the case of "Solomon and Saturn I." Although the preserved text is fragmented, it appears to be a collection of enigmatic questions posed by Saturn. Confusion is even more prevalent here, as the logic of the questions' arrangement is obscure and, albeit Saturn inquires about fate, old age and wisdom, he additionally poses some unintelligibly cryptic problems, like the highly cryptic concept of the *Vasa Mortis* (ll. 75–102), that now utterly escape any explanation. What is, then, the significance of the apparently disorderly pattern, which is also echoed by the disorderly patterns of many other gnomic poems, such as the gnomic texts from the Exeter Book, "The Rune Poem" and the Cotton Tiberius "Maxims II"? Like in "Solomon and Saturn I," confusion and mystery appear to be of twofold nature in "Solomon and Saturn II." First of all, their source is the mystery of free will and the freedom of interpretation

²⁶ ISIDORE of SEVILLE, *Etymologiae*, Book I, Ch. III, in: *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi etymologiarum sive originum liber I: De grammatica*, *The Latin Library*, 15 October 2005, <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/isidore/1.shtml>>.

²⁷ "Solomon and Saturn I," p. 160, ll. 146–147.

²⁸ "Solomon and Saturn I," p. 161, ll. 146–147.

emanating from it. It is what King Alfred described as resulting from one's *andgit* and *æmetta*, "intellect" and "leisure"; the sense of freedom of the actual application and understanding of the individual maxims. Secondly, confusion, arising from the chaotic organization of the texts, is central to wisdom literature as betokening the limitations of wisdom. In "Solomon and Saturn II" the confusing and chaotic order of statements is imposed on Solomon by a series of Saturn's questions. Thus it is Saturn who, in somewhat carnivalesque terms, introduces disorientation by dictating the order of the discussion. The dichotomy between Saturn and Solomon is of complementary nature, however, and the dialogue makes it clear that Solomon and Saturn are united by their search. However true it is that they are conflicted and competing against each other, it is equally true that the objective of their search, that is, the quest for wisdom is essentially the same, although realized by different means. Solomon and Saturn of the second dialogue appear to be like the two sceptres held in the hands of the mysterious Alfred Jewel figure: if Saturn's quest is obvious, as he continues asking questions to Solomon, Solomon's answers and his willingness to take part in the dialogue are also clear signs of the shortcomings of his *andgit* and his hidden hope for transcending its limitations. Naturally, Saturn stands for the side associated with chaos, whereas Solomon represents the world of order, or to use Nietzschean terms, Saturn is Dionysian, while Solomon is Apollonian. This sense of a mutually interdependent unity between them is only increased when Solomon refers to Saturn as *broðor*, "brother" (l. 151), even though, at that precise moment, he is expressing his scorn for Saturn:

Ne sceall ic ðe hwæðre, broðor, abelgan; ðu eart swiðe bitters cynnes,
Eorre eormenstrynde. Ne beyrn ðu in ða inwitgecyndo!²⁹

But I shall not anger you, brother; you are of a very bitter race,
of fierce and mighty stock. Do not be ruled by those evil instincts!³⁰

And thus, as much as the maxims, answers and wisdom provided by Solomon enlighten Saturn, then a similar thing is done for Solomon. Saturn, with the help of his baffling question, figuratively conveys one the most important lessons to Solomon, that is, a lesson on the need to ascertain the limitations of wisdom and to acknowledge the limitations of orderliness.

Yet another Old English gnomic text, which was actually titled "The Order of the World" by its early editors, speaks of such necessity for accepting one's sense of limitation as imposed by God:

²⁹ "Solomon and Saturn II," p. 174, ll. 151–152.

³⁰ "Solomon and Saturn II," p. 175, ll. 151–152.

Nis þæt monnes gemet moldhererendra,
 þæt he mæge in hreþre his heah geweorc
 furþor aspyrgan þonne him frea sylle
 to ongieltanne godes agen bibod;³¹

It is not meet for man, of those who move on earth,
 to explore in his mind God's noble work
 any further that the Lord will allow
 him to perceive what he ordains.³²

"The Order of the World" corresponds to the general sentiment present in "Solomon and Saturn II," but it also echoes and recapitulates the remark on the sense of insufficiency as the fundament of human condition, which Alfred puts into the mouth of *Gesceadwines*, "Wisdom," in another fragment from his rendering of Boethius:

[*Gesceadwines cwæð*]: Forðy we scoldon ealle mægene spyrian æfter Gode, þ[æt] we wissen hwæt he wære. Deah hit ure mæð ne sie þ[æt] we witen hwylc he sie, we sculon þeah be þæs andgites [intellectual capacity] mæðe þe he us gifð fandian; swa swa we ær cwædon þ[æt] mon scolde ælc þing ongitan be his andgites mæpe, forðæm we ne magon ælc þing ongitan swylc swylce hit bið.³³

[Wisdom speaking]: "Therefore we must investigate God with all our might, so that we may know what He is. Although it is not within our capacity to know what He is like, we ought nevertheless to inquire with the intellectual capacity which He gives us, just as we previously stated that one should understand everything according to one's intellectual capacity, given that we cannot understand everything as it really is."³⁴

It is only by being aware of the insufficiency of what Alfred calls here *andgit*, "intellectual capacity," that one can draw near wisdom. Alfred's Boethius, as well as the Old English wisdom texts, appear to be claiming then that true sapience lies not in the knowledge that is either bestowed or acquired by man, but in the Socratic recognition of its lack, that is, in the sense of constant absence and inadequacy experienced by those who are in search for it.

This is a thoroughly humanizing perspective, it seems, and, in "Solomon and Saturn II," it is a true lesson in humility and limitation that Solomon receives in his contest with Saturn. Although "Solomon and Saturn II" fin-

³¹ "The Order of the World," in: *Anglo-Saxon Didactic Verse*, p. 108, ll. 27–30.

³² "The Order ...," p. 109, ll. 27–30.

³³ *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius' ...*, Chapter XLII, p. 147, ll. 12–17.

³⁴ *Alfred ...*, p. 136.

ishes with Solomon's victory in the wisdom match with Saturn, it is also a humanizing victory for both of them and a synthesis between the two traditions they stand for, for we hear not only of Solomon's wisdom in the last lines of the poem. Solomon's superiority is crowned with Saturn's contended and elated laughter:

Hæfde ða se snotra sunu Dauides
forcumen and forcyðed Caldea eorl.
Hwæðre was on sælum se ðe of siðe cwom
feorran gefered; næfre ær his ferhð ahlog.³⁵

Then the wise son of David had mastered
the Chaldean prince and put him to shame. Yet,
he who had come on that journey [i.e. Saturn], brought from afar,
was glad: he had never before laughed from his heart.³⁶

In the Old English tradition man, in his cognitive experience, is then suspended between what is revealed, and thus what is possible to be discovered and interpreted, and that which is metaphysically concealed, and thus cryptic. Wisdom without unknowing and without confusion is of little value in Old English gnomic texts and King Salomon would not have been praised for his wisdom without the subversiveness introduced by Saturn.

Interestingly, a comparable perspective on the role of mystery and confusion in literature, and the potential for intellectual humility created by them, has been revisited and applied in modern myth studies. Eric Gould's view on the connection between myth and language, influenced by de Saussure and Bathes, fundamentally centres on the humanizing function of the lacuna between the signifier and the signified in language and in myth. For him, the lacuna appears in the reliance on constructs and "fictions to make sense of our world,"³⁷ as he puts it, and serves to bridge the inadequacy within language to explain the inexplicable. Gould remarks that the humanizing function of myth as a form of language "affirms that man is *fortunately* limited and inhibited by the language [...] and he is largely in a condition of not-knowing. He is able to understand only by means of projections of his inhibitions onto external events, by this limited foreknowledge, and by the fantasies which the outside stimulates."³⁸ As much as this a theoretical stance, it is also a representation of an existential outlook that, in its core, goes back to old wisdom texts.

³⁵ "Solomon and Saturn II," p. 186, ll. 333–336.

³⁶ "Solomon and Saturn II," p. 187, ll. 333–336.

³⁷ ERIC GOULD, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press), p. 11.

³⁸ GOULD, *Mythical ...*, p. 66. Emphasis mine.

It shares its emphasis on the creative power of absence with the Old English emphasis on accepting confusion and mystery, symbolically present in the corresponding sceptres of Wisdom, looking at us, across the centuries, from the Alfred Jewel.

Rafał Boryslawski

Klejnót króla Alfreda i „Rozmowy Salomona z Saturnem”:
mądrość i chaos w staroangielskich tekstach gnomicznych

Streszczenie

Celem rozważań zawartych w artykule są kwestie związane z mądrością przynoszącą władzę nad dyskursem, pojawiające się w niezwykle hermetycznych staroangielskich dialogach poetyckich, znanych jako „Rozmowy Salomona z Saturnem” i zachowanych w rękopisie Cambridge Corpus Christi. Oba teksty, skomponowane w popularnej we wczesnym średniowieczu formie dysputy pomiędzy królem Salomonem i wątpiącym w jego słowa Saturnem, wydają się celowo chaotyczne i niejasne. Niejasność i chaotyczność owej dysputy może stanowić jednak specyficzną strategię poetycką, która przejawia się również w innych staroangielskich tekstach gnomicznych. Zasadą nie jest tu jasność wyводу, ale właśnie jego zagadkowość, zgodnie z jedną z gnomicznych sentencji zawartych w anglosaskich „Maksymach”: *soð bið switolost*, „prawda jest złudna”. Dychotomia pomiędzy wiedzą i niewiedzą jest w nich przedstawiona na podstawie chrześcijańskiej filozofii poczucia doniosłości tego, co nieokreślone. Staroangielskie teksty gnomiczne przedstawiają zatem prawdziwą wartość mądrości jako istniejącą dzięki jej przeciwieństwu, czyli niewiedzy i tajemnicy. Analiza wczesnośredniowiecznych dialogów poetyckich, podjęta w artykule, zawiera również odniesienia do innych staroangielskich tekstów gnomicznych, a jej punkt wyjścia to pochodzący z IX wieku przedmiot, tzw. klejnót króla Alfreda. Postać, którą on przedstawia, jest odczytana w artykule jako symboliczny wizerunek wzajemnego przenikania się chaosu i porządku w staroangielskiej poezji gnomicznej.

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König Alfreds Juwel und *Salomons Gespräche mit Saturn*:
Weisheit und Chaos in altenglischen Weisheitssprüchen

Zusammenfassung

Das Ziel der vorliegenden Monografie ist, über die Probleme der Weisheit zu diskutieren, die in sehr hermetischen, altenglischen poetischen Dialogen, *Salomons Gespräche mit Saturn*, und den im Manuskript erhalten gebliebenen Cambridge Corpus Christi erscheinen. Die beiden Texte, die in Form des im Frühmittelalter populären Disputs zwischen dem König Salomon und dem

seine Worte bezweifelnden Saturn geschrieben worden sind, scheinen absichtlich chaotisch und unverständlich zu sein. Unklarheit und Verworrenheit des Disputs können aber eine spezifische poetische Strategie darstellen, die auch in anderen altenglischen gnomologischen Texten zum Vorschein kommt. Zum Prinzip wird hier nicht die Klarheit der Argumentation selbst, sondern deren Rätselhaftigkeit, laut einer, der in angelsächsischen „Maximen“ enthaltenen Sentenzen: *soð bið switolost* („Die Wahrheit ist trügerisch“). Die Dichotomie zwischen Wissen und Unwissenheit stützt sich hier auf christliche Philosophie der Überzeugung von der Bedeutung dessen, was unbestimmt ist. In altenglischen gnomologischen Texten wird also gezeigt, dass der Wert von der Weisheit von ihren Gegensätzen, der Unwissenheit und dem Geheimnis abhängig ist. Bei der Analyse der frühmittelalterlichen poetischen Dialoge bezieht sich der Verfasser der Monografie auf andere altenglische Weisheitssprüche; der Ausgangspunkt bildet hier der aus dem 19.Jh. stammende Gegenstand, das sog. Königs Alfreds Juwel. Die von ihm verkörperte Form wird von dem Verfasser als symbolisches Bild der gegenseitigen Durchdringung des Chaos und der Ordnung in altenglischen gnomologischen Dichtung betrachtet.